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ABSTRACT

As a result of the emphasis given to the "black perspective" since the late 1960s, there has been a proliferation of research and writing on the black experience by black social scientists. However, a coherent and integrated body of knowledge on the nature of the black experience has yet to be established. There has been no attempt to develop a cumulative body of knowledge that would clearly establish the direction for a new black sociology. Until black social scientists begin to shift their attention and energies from the relabeling of words and the use of imprecisely defined and non-operationalized concepts, they will reinforce the non-cumulative path which presently characterizes their efforts. Avant garde black social scientists must test and verify propositions. It is their task to convert those elements of reality with which blacks are concerned into intellectually insightful propositions. It is the resulting "unified body of verified principles" that will lead to a black radical paradigm of American society with appropriate and pro-black models and theories of black life and culture. (Author/RLV)

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REFLECTIONS ON THE NEW BLACK SOCIOLOGY: THE COST OF IMPROPER PREOCCUPATIONS IN THEORIZING

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One legacy of the Black liberation movement of the late sixties, in the United States, has been the instillment within Black social scientists in general, and sociologists in particular, of a quest for "self-affirmation" via the development of "Black perspectives" to guide their theorizing and research on the Black experience. Speaking on this issue, Black social scientist Nathan Hare observes that, the "Black perspective" is informed by a belief that the Black scholar "must de-colonize his mind so that he may effectively guide other intellectuals and students in their search for liberation" (Hare, 1969:58). Likewise, Andrew Billingsley, irritated by the White social science "distortions" of "Black realities", declares that "it is clearly the task of young Black social scientists, who can combine their own experience with their technical competence, to clarify for us the nature of these realities" (Billingsley, 1972).

As a result of the emphasis given to the "Black perspective", there has been a proliferation of research and writing on the Black experience by Black social scientists (see: Ladner, 1971, 1973; Staples, 1970, 1971; Thompson, 1974, Edwards, 1970). However, a coherent and integrated body of knowledge on the nature of the Black experience has yet to be established. In effect, there has been no noticable attempt - on the part of Black sociologists in particular - to begin to develop a cumulative body of knowledge that would clearly establish the direction and set the tone for a new Black sociology -

A sociology for the service of Blacks. A sociology concerned with developing knowledge of direct service to Black people as citizens, as consumers and as neighbors. This includes studies of ways in which Black people can protect themselves from manipulation in undesirable ways by those in positions of power, of how to achieve more livable homes and communities, of constructive alternatives to the Black predicament in American society, and many more.

Let me call attention to Harold Cruse's observation on the need for such a body of knowledge on Black Americans, Cruse (1968) notes that ". . . the Black American as part of an ethnic group has no definite social theory relative to his status, presence, or impact on American society . . ." This paper will attempt to set forth the preliminary conditions necessary for the development of a cumulative body of knowledge that will result in the formulation of a definite social theory that explains the Black experience within American society.

Whatever the concept of cumulative knowledge may be taken to imply, it must certainly refer not only to the pontifications of selected Black sociologists and social scientists, but to a "related body of principles that has evolved in the light of reason and evidence and to which a community of investigators has contributed" (Freese, 1972: 473). The desire that sociological knowledge on the Black experience be cumulative has also been expressed in other terms. Black University of Chicago sociology Professor William J. Wilson (1974),

observes that, "because the observations and formulations relating several aspects of the Black experience are made by Black sociologists, the need for direct verification of any of the formulations or conclusions reached would not be negated." Speaking on the insider doctrine, that only Black Scholars can understand the Black experience, Wilson notes:

> An adequate understanding of any subject matter within the purview of science is not simply a matter of having lived that experience but rather a demonstration that the items described and the propositions relating the items are, in fact, valid, and involve as a necessary condition for their being accepted the possibility of being verified through controlled experiment.

One does not have cumulative knowledge on the Black experience when progressive Black sociologists and social scientists, who clearly understand the inappropriateness of white social science, are "engaged in word games by suggesting new labels for regularities which white scholarship identified as being consequential" (Jones, 1976). For example, such Black social scientists as Preston Wilcox, Ronald Walters and Abdul Alkalimat all seem to think changing lables, i.e. substituting words neocolonialism for tokenism, freedom for equality, Negro removal for urban renewal, etc., represents important changes in concept information (Jones, 1976). As Jones notes however, the important question is, to what empirical regularities do the labels refer? Substituting new lables for the same regularities changes nothing. Nor does this "word game" aid in the development of cumulative knowledge on the Black experience. One has such a body of knowledge only when operational

definitions are employed to link concepts having "socio-political" content to the empirical phenomena which they purport to represent. In addition, these concepts must be arranged and formulated into propositions about the Black experience that can be verified through application of the scientific method. We must cast our propositions into forms which are testable, so that ultimately, we may develop vast bodies of accumulated research findings on the Black experience. Above all, we must develop new propositions in light of such findings. Let us renounce our preoccupation with the literature of the Black experience and instead work with scientifically arrived at propositions!!

If, then, accumulation depends upon the assessment of theoretical and empirical propositions[1] in the light of empirical data, how do we establish such a tradition? Emphasis is upon developing conditions for the construction of "a unified body of verified principles" which permit the "systematic construction of verbal sociological generalizations"[2] about the Black experience. Such a tradition is established when Black sociologists and social scientists began to convert the positions of the

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[1]It will be helpful to distinguish two different types of propositions which may be used by sociologists. First he may use theoretical propositions, such propositions are composed of theoretical concepts (Abstract concepts whose application requires intermediate steps, i.e., "operationalization" and "rules of correspondence"). An entirely different type of proposition which may be used is an empirical proposition, it is composed of at least one empirical or observable concept (such concepts are immediately susceptible to direct sensory observation, and they offer the advantage of enabling direct empirical test of the propositions in which they are used).

[2]By the term "generalization" we mean simply "any substantive proposition asserted to be true for some specified domain which contains at least one case that has not been observed" (Freese, 1972:475).

various groups or individuals (i.e. Nationalists, Integrationalists, Pluralists, the Black capitalists, Jesse Jackson, Amiri Baraka, etc.) offering alternative solutions, and polemical descriptions of the Black experience, into propositions which lend themselves to empirical verification. It is our (Black sociologists and social scientists) responsibility to examine the description of reality upon which a particular group or individual bases its analysis. Once that description is examined thoroughly and broken down into relevant propositional statements the validity of these propositions can be determined by applying them to the empirical reality with which they purport to deal. Let me hasten to point out that this is not an argument for uninvolved social scientists who eschew practice while engaging in antiseptic theorizing. Black social scientists, as Mack Jones has so eloquently stated, "If they are to be creative must be immersed in social problem situations, but their contributions as social scientists should be measured in terms of their ability to clarify social reality so that the masses and their leaders can make more intelligent choices among competing alternatives." (Jones, 1976:16).

Thus, before a definite social theory of the Black experience can be formulated, Black sociologists and social scientists must begin to define their concepts (i.e. integration, nationalism, cultural nationalists, Black middle class, petty bourgeois, revolutionary nationalists, pan-Africanism, etc.) clearly and precisely, including operational definitions to link their concepts to the empirical world. In addition, their concepts must be used to develop insightful propositions about contemporary Black

existence that can be tested and verified through scientific analysis. The resulting body of verified propositions will serve as the basis of substantive generalizations about Black experience in American society.

Development of a well-established body of theory grounded in empirical research is a goal to which most Black sociologists subscribe. Several reasons for the relative lack of development of such a body of theory in the area of the Black experience regularly have been advanced; for example, "Black social science stresses emphasis on concepts not easily operationalized or quantified," "the aim of Black social science should not be to achieve scientific adequacy but to aid in Black liberation." More basic than these reasons, I believe, is the fact that the conceptions held by many Black social scientists of what scientific theory is, and of the use of empirical evidence in the cumulative development of theory, are curiosly different from the meanings which are given to these activities in developed sciences. It is not that Black social scientists are studying the wrong things about the Black experience, but rather that they are studying them in the wrong ways. As a result of a misunderstanding of the goals of empirical science many Black sociologists and social scientists have sacrificed development of theory for a kind of non-cumulative conceptualizing. The major reason for this appears to be in the manner in which Black sociologists perceive the "function" or "purpose" of theory for science.

Much of the "theorizing" among Black sociologists and social scientists has concentrated on the development of definitions of the descriptive categories" that Black social scientists use. (For example, see Edwards,

1970; and Staples, 1974.) The goal of such a concern is the development of "an orderly schema defining anything to which sociologists (and other social scientists) should pay attention. Names are assigned to these subjects, and the reader is encouraged to go out and discover their concrete manifestations in all parts of society." A more specific term than "theory" for this system of definitions, according to Zetterberg, (1965:21) is "sociological taxonomy."

In this paper, however, I shall speak of sociological theory as, "systematically organized, lawlike propositions about society that can be supported by evidence" (Zetterberg, 1965:22). In addition, a sociological theory is an "explanation" of some social phenomenon. An explanation says that based upon what we already know, we can expect X to occur providing A.B.C. . .N are done. The quality of an explanation is determined by the accuracy of its prediction (predictive power). This is "theory" in the sense the word is used in other sciences. As Zetterberg (1965) notes, "taxonomy enters this enterprise only to the extent that we sometimes need to define the terms used in our propositions." Taxonomies do not consist of testable propositions: they summarize and inspire descriptive studies.

Thus, to know the labels of phenomena and to know their distribution is not to explain them. At best, taxonomies provide sociologists with "sets of definitions" and "maps of distributions" identifying the crucial aspects or variables to be studied in the phenomenal real world. For example, when Black sociologist Harry Edwards (1970) classifies "Black student activists" into "radical activists, militant, revolutionary,

anomic activists, and conforming Negro" he does not provide an explanation of activism among Black students, rather he shows that the general terms defining his dimensions have identifiable counterparts on college campuses. Thus, Edwards' taxonomy leads to a descriptive study which presents the distribution of some Black students on the variable "student activism." Similarly, Robert Staples' (1974) classification of sexual types among Black females - i.e."Conservative," "Moderate," "Liberal" and "Radical" leads to a descriptive analysis of the sexual behavior of Black females. Had Staples formulated and tested insightful propositions about sexual behavior among Black females, he would have directed his attention toward explaining rather than describing the sexual behavior of Blacks.

Black sociological thinking, if it is to support a Black sociology, must let some of the effort now going into the making of descriptive studies be allocated to the verification of propositions - the central elements of theory. Through stating and testing propositions we are able to determine how well a theory explains a phenomenon. To see this, it is necessary to quote Zeterberg (1965:28) at length here:

> To "test" a theory, we check how well each of its propositions conforms to data and how well several propositions in conjunction with each other account for the outcome of a given situation. If such a "derivation" (or prediction) is successful, we call the outcome "explained;" that is, we claim that observed events conform to known propositions.

Thus, this researcher is able to explain suicide among Blacks in the city of New Orleans, Louisiana by a reference to Henry and Short's

(1954) already established proposition that "suicides vary inversely with external restraints in the form of social structures, relationships, and groups to which the individuals belong.[3]

Theories summarize and inspire, not descriptive studies, but verificational studies - studies construed to test specific hypotheses. The number of such studies, by Black sociologists and social scientists, writing on the Black experience is conspicuously small.

There is nothing in the position I have developed thus far which would prevent Black sociologists from using their research and theorizing to advance the cause of Black liberation. As Staples (1973) has indicated, "Black sociology must be the science of liberation." All I am emphasizing is that studies of Black Americans can be most fruitful for Black freedom, when Black sociologists (and social scientists) formulate specific hypotheses and then report data that bear on them. This approach represents what I see as the main task of Black sociologists and social scientists -that is, the development of a unified body of verified principles that "explain" aspects of the Black experience.

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[3]The following propositions concerning "external restraints," defined as "the degree to which behavior is required to conform to the demands and expectations of other persons," were confirmed. (1) Black suicide varies negatively with strength of relational systems (horizontal restraint deriving from involvement in social relationships with others.), and (2) positively with status (vertical restraint deriving from one's superor subordinate position, as in the class system or any other relevant status hierarchy). See: Davis and Short's "Dimensions of Black Suicide: A Theoretical Model" (forthcoming).

To summarize then, until we (Black sociologists and social scientists) begin to shift some of our attention and energies from the relabeling of words, the use of imprecisely defined and non-operationalized concepts, and the breezy description of complex phenomena, we are doomed to wander in the well beaten circular, non-cumulative path which presently characterize our efforts. Avant-garde Black sociologists and social scientists, must be about the testing and verification of propositions. It is our task to convert those elements of reality with which Blacks are concerned into intellectually insightful propositions. It is the resulting "unified body of verified principles" that will lead to a Black radical paradigm of American society with appropriate and pro-black models and theories of Black life and culture. Black sociologists should and must take the lead in this inexpendable undertaking.

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